

The Noah Covenant
(Genesis 8:20 - 9:17)

Turn to Genesis 6. This morning we'll look at the covenant God made with Noah. Our main text will be Genesis 9, which is right after the flood, but we'll start with Genesis 6, just before the flood.

By "the Noah covenant" I mean the promises God made to Noah after the flood. God is clear in those promises that they apply to every living thing on earth. That means us: God made these promises with us, too.

The Noah covenant, the promises God made to Noah and every living thing on the earth after Noah affect our life every day. A lot of things we take for granted, in the world around us, are God keeping those very old promises. Those promises shape every day.

I should say that with this sermon, am beginning a series on "OT turning points." It will be mostly on the key events of Israel's history, but we'll begin at the flood.

We'll go right through the OT and look at events that changed the future, where life was different afterward because these things happened. The Noah covenant is the first.

Usually I quote from the TNIV, but today I am using the English Standard Version because it is more literal; and I am tinkering with that a little bit too.

Gen 6:5-8 - The LORD saw that the wickedness of people was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. ⁶And the LORD was sorry that he had made people on the earth; and it pained his heart. ⁷So the LORD said, "I will blot out people whom I have created from the face of the land, people and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them." ⁸But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD.

Eve and Adam sinned by eating the fruit, and then Cain killed Abel, and it got this bad: *every intention of the thoughts of their hearts only evil continually.*

It does not just say that people were wicked. It says "*The LORD saw.*" At the end of creation we read *God saw all that he had made, and indeed it was very good.* But not any more. Now he saw that everything was bad.

In 6:6 we read that God was sorry that he had made people, and that it pained his heart; and in 6:7 again that he was sorry. God did not send the flood because he was angry with sin. He sent it because he was so grieved at what had happened to what he made.

In the next verses, notice two things: one, not only humanity was ruined, all flesh, including animals, was ruined; and two, the earth itself, separate from life, was ruined.

Notice 6:7 again - *So the LORD said, "I will blot out people whom I have created from the face of the land, people and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them.* God was sorry about all living things, not just people.

And this spread also to the earth itself.

Gen 6:11-13 - *Now the earth was ruined in God's sight; and the earth was filled with violence. ¹²And God saw the earth; and Look! It was ruined, for all flesh had ruined their way on the earth. ¹³And God said to Noah, "I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. Behold, I will ruin them with the earth.*

Human evil, human violence, had spread to all living things, all animals. It started with people, but animals also had been infected and violent in a way God did not intend.
6:12: *all flesh had ruined their way (their habits) on the earth.*

What's more, this evil, like an infection, had spread to the earth itself, the rocks and trees and dirt and lakes and rivers and mountains and plains and valleys and oceans. The earth itself had become evil, it was ruined. And the flood was to ruin earth, too.

This sounds weird to us, and not even possible. It does not sound scientific. Science is good with molecules, but science does not have a way of looking at good and bad. In Scripture, the land itself is affected and infected. An example from Leviticus:

Leviticus 18:24-28 - *Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, because this is how the nations that I am going to drive out before you became defiled. ²⁵ Even the land was defiled; so I punished it for its sin, and the land vomited out its inhabitants. ²⁶ But you must keep my decrees and my laws. The native-born and the foreigners residing among you must not do any of these detestable things, ²⁷ for all these things were done by the people who lived in the land before you, and the land became defiled. ²⁸ And if you defile the land, it will vomit you out as it vomited out the nations that were before you.*

Land, earth, absorbs moral character of people around it, like a sponge; the land can become evil. So the flood was not just to get rid of evil people. The flood was to get rid of all living things, for they all had become evil. And it was to get rid of the earth, for the earth itself also had become evil.

I know that this can sound like God is quite unfair to animals and to earth. That's because they seem so innocent to us. In some sense that is true, because animals and earth caught the infection from people.

Remember also, though, that we just don't understand about good and bad very well. We see some things about good and bad, but not everything.

Now, let's turn to the end of Genesis 8, and take a look at God's promises after the flood. We'll pick up the story right after Noah & family and animals come out of the ark.

Gen 8:20-22 - *Then Noah built an altar to the LORD and took some of every clean animal and some of every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar. ²¹ And when the LORD smelled the pleasing aroma, the LORD said in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of people, for the intention of the human heart is evil from youth. Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done. ²² While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease."*

Verse 21 is a sad verse, because in it God tells himself that he has not fixed anything, that the human problem is as big and bad as ever. Let's read v21 again: *And when the LORD smelled the pleasing aroma, the LORD said in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of people, for the intention of the human heart is evil from youth.*

And if humans are still evil, then the animals will all become infected again, and if the animals all become infected again, so will the earth itself become infected and evil again.

In these verses at the end of Genesis 8, don't miss God's concern for the earth itself. God's words begin with "the ground," and they end with his focus on "the earth," a different word for the same thing. The ground, the earth, are God's concern here.

8:21-22 *And when the LORD smelled the pleasing aroma, the LORD said in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of people, for the intention of the human heart is evil from youth. Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done. ²² While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease."*

In some way that I do not understand, Noah's offering changes God's attitude to human evil and all the problems it causes. The problem has not changed, so God changes.

Can you sense the humbleness of God here? Why should God change how he's going to act? He's done nothing wrong. But God wants relationship with people, and people full of evil intentions from their youth, so God decides to change.

Never again will strike down every living creature, the way he did in the flood. And as long as the earth itself remains, God will make sure that there is always: *seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night.*

Gen 9:1-7 - *And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. ² The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth and upon every bird of the heavens, upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish of the sea. Into your hand they are delivered. ³ Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. And as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. ⁴ But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. ⁵ And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man. ⁶ "Whoever sheds the*

*blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made people in his own image.
7And you, be fruitful and multiply, teem on the earth and multiply in it."*

This is a pretty full paragraph, lots here, most of which I will ignore. Just two observations:

9:1, 7 - The paragraph opens and closes with God repeating the blessing he gave to Adam and Eve, to be fruitful and have lots of children and fill the earth with people.

Even though every intention of the human heart is only evil from youth, God still wants the earth covered with people. God's eyes are wide open about people, and he wants lots.

9:6 - God made people in his own image. We read that in Genesis 1, that God made humans male and female, and that he made them in his own image and likeness.

The question is, can this still be true, since people have sinned and are so full of evil inclinations? Yes, it is still true. People still are in the image of God.

Here is a remarkable portrait of humans: the intention of every human heart is evil from youth; God made people in his own image. These two both true of every human on earth. Every son of Adam and every daughter of Eve: (1) the intentions of the human heart are evil from youth; and (2) people are made in God's image, shaped to be God's likeness.

Gen 9:8-11a - In these verses, God makes his promise to every single living thing on earth. You and I are included, but it is just as much to every animal as it is to us.

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 9"Look, I establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you, 10and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the livestock, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark; it is for every beast of the earth. 11 I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood.

Gen 9:11b - In the end of v11, God makes the promise specifically to the earth, not humans or animals or birds, but the earth itself: *and never again shall there be a flood to ruin the earth.*"

Gen 9:12 - The bow is not just for people, but for every living thing, for all their future generations: *And God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations:*

Gen 9:13 - Here, the rainbow, the sign of the covenant is not with the living things, but again, between God and the earth itself. *I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.*

Gen 9:14-17 - In these final verses, God does not talk about the ground or the earth any more, but only all living things, all flesh.

God will make other covenants in the future, and there will be other covenant signs. In the Noah covenant, the rainbow is the sign. What is different about this covenant sign is that other covenant signs are to remind people, but the rainbow is to remind God.

Gen 9:14-17 - *When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵ I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh. And the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. ¹⁶ When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth. ¹⁷ God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth."*

(v15) I will remember my covenant; (16) When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember.

God gets kind of repetitive by the end. That's not accidental. The repetition, saying the same thing over in slightly different ways, is to tell us how seriously God takes this. He is locking himself in as solemnly as he can. He absolutely intends to keep this promise.

There are two limitations to God's promise. One, "as long as the earth endures" in 8:22 - *While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.*

"While the earth remains" is not quite the same as "forever." Some scriptures say that the earth will be fixed up at the end, and others say that this earth will pass away and there will be a new heaven and a new earth.

This earth may not last forever. But while this earth remains, God will care for it and life on it, in the way he promised.

The other limitation is flooding. God may at some future time judge earth by some other means, but never again with a flood. In Gen 9:11 *I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to ruin the earth.*

And in v15c also, *and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh.*

At the end of human history there will be an immense judgment by God on people, and in some ways it will be as serious as the flood judgment. But it will not be by a flood.

Never again by a flood. As long as the earth endures, God will preserve all life. So the Noah covenant is God promising his creation, people and animals and earth, that this bad thing won't happen again: never again a flood.

But there is more to it than that. God also promises to keep making earth a good place for life. The last verse of chapter 8 promised seed time and harvest, as long as the earth endured. That's a lot more than just promising no more flood.

In that last verse of Gen 8, God says, *seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease*. The earth will be a good place for life. There have been many climate changes on this planet in the past. They will still happen. God promises to preserve it so that earth will be good for people: cold and heat.

In 9:1 (and remember Genesis was not written with chapter divisions) God blesses human life again: *be fruitful and have lots of children and fill the earth*. That comes right after the promise that the earth will be a good place for life.

Even though God can see that humans will be as evil as ever, which means that animals and earth will also be infected, God promises to carry people and animals and earth itself in a cradle of his care. God will make the earth a good place for all life.

(By the way, we think everything is always getting worse. I don't know if that's true. It's been bad for quite a long time already. I doubt if its any worse than it was before the flood.)

God promised that there would always be *seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night*. These things never stop happening, just keep going.

These things have been happening so faithfully that some people have decided there is no God at all. Everything seems to work fine without him. According to the Noah covenant, all this keeps happening, without exception, because God keeps old promises.

The earth is full of life. It is full of human life, and full of all kinds of animal life, birds and fish and reptiles and insects and so on. This is true, in spite of a lot of human sin.

We live in a cradle of God's kindness. We tend to see God only in what is unusual. The Noah covenant teaches us that we see God's faithfulness exactly in those things that have always been this way.

Jesus said that God clothes flowers, and that God feeds the birds. Jesus said that not one bird falls to the ground without God knowing it. Jesus said that God makes the sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. This is all God keeping his Noah promises.

In Acts 14:17, Paul says this to pagan idol worshippers: *God has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy*. This is all God keeping his Noah promises.

We live in a cradle of his care for the whole sinful planet. It is all around us every hour. We experience much more of God's care than we realize. Let's give thanks, often, now.